Land and local kingship in eighteenth-century Bengal

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1 Introduction

The eighteenth century in India began with the disintegration of one great empire and ended with the birth of another. The wars of succession, rebellions, invasions, and warlordism gave rise to "the Black Legend of the eighteenth century"[1] which emphasized economic decline and patterns of disorder during the dissolution of Mughal power. Pre-World War II historical analyses attributed the chaotic condition of the century to extractive absolutism or moral decay, with a surge of disloyalty, opportunism, and corruption. British accounts, seeking to justify European colonialism and demonstrate the inferiority of Indian culture and political forms, tended to portray Indian states as arbitrary and predatory, without the mitigating checks of private property, an hereditary, intermediate aristocracy between the Mughal elite and agrarian society, or even a coherent legal framework. They credited colonial rule with substituting administrative and commercial stability for what they described as pre-colonial despotism disintegrating into anarchy.

Historical revisionism

Since World War II, and especially in the 1980s, scholars have revised the older dominant view that the British conquest marked such a clear disjuncture in Indian development. Historians have noted the growing monetization and commercialization of the pre-colonial economy, made possible by the Mughal collection of money taxes, the importation from Europe of silver bullion that Indian rulers minted into rupees, and rising commodity production and trade, both internal and foreign. Instead of seeing British rule as reversing the trajectory of dominant trends, the new school sees the late Mughal economy having evolved communities of profit-oriented entrepreneurs and military adventurers, some of whose interests converged with European interests. Consequently, groups of Indians cooperated with European soldier-merchants in the fluid

[1] C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 35.

competitive politics of the eighteenth century. By 1760, the English East India Company and its Indian allies were the most cohesive and powerful military and commercial interest in India.[2]

The reassessment of the transition between Mughal and colonial rule was stimulated by the shift of scholarly attention from the highest levels of government and the fierce struggles in the imperial heartland around Delhi. The new focus has been the regions away from the capital, the secondary and tertiary levels of power, and the multitude of institutions and social groups essentially independent of the imperial state. As historians have reexamined the causes of the Mughal empire's rapid disintegration after 1700, they have directed their interest to the relatively stable and compact dynastic "successor states" and local chiefdoms which carried on the Mughal administrative system long after emperors had lost their decisive role. The result of these new analyses has been a revised understanding of both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It now seems that the Mughal state was never as absolute or centralized as once believed and that even at its apogee it depended heavily on non-military factors of support, especially on the cooperation of Hindu government employees, bankers, merchants, and landholders. The significant cooption and participation of intermediate, locally based groups in the Mughal empire, in its successor states, and in the transition to British rule is the bridge or common ground between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Historians now acknowledge more insistently that the collaboration of intermediate groups between states and agrarian society was necessary to incorporate local areas into either an India-wide empire or regional state systems and that both provided arenas for the fulfillment of personal ambitions among enterprising regional and local leaders. In fact, those ambitions first enabled the successor states to achieve their independence from Delhi and then were instrumental in British expansion and consolidation.

Bernard S. Cohn was one of the first people to reorient attention away from imperial politics to the relations between regional governments and "little kingdoms." He argued that although a group such as the Mughals might claim "absolute authority," in fact "power and authority most frequently are distributed among vertically or hierarchically ordered groups." The perpetual "conflict and competition" between these intermediate groups "paradoxically" led to an uneasy balance of political forces at the regional level.[3] Subsequent studies of

[2] See C.A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India*, II.1, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988); also, Burton Stein, "Eighteenth Century India: Another View," *Studies in History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1989), pp. 1-26.

[3] Bernard S. Cohn, "Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: The Banaras Region," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 82, no. 3 (July–Sept. 1962), p. 313. See also Bernard S. Cohn, "Structural Change in Indian Rural Society, 1596–1885," in Robert Eric Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison, WI, 1969).

the eighteenth century have utilized variations on the same theme, maintaining that "the dignity and power of kingship" were widely shared through the political hierarchy so the Mughal emperor was "*Shah-an-Shah*, 'king of kings,'" rather than an "oriental despot" presiding over a centralized state.[4]

Muzaffar Alam,[5] Christopher Bayly,[6] Philip Calkins,[7] and André Wink,[8] among others, have emphasized the vitality of the intermediate structures of power in Awadh, Bengal, the Punjab, and the vast Maratha domains which covered most of the former Mughal territory. Together they have suggested that a redistribution rather than a decline of resources took place in the eighteenth century, with actual expansions of agricultural production, trade, and state revenue collections over broad areas. The principal beneficiaries from the decentralized but growing economy were the regional gentry – merchants, government "service" groups, and zamindars (the hereditary local rulers and collectors of the state's land revenues).

C.A. Bayly has been especially important in demonstrating the adaptive, dynamic role of the merchants and service gentry "between the revenue-based state and the mass of agrarian society" in the eighteenth century.[9] The commercial classes and service gentry were vital agents in the growth of trade and the money economy, in the emergence of relatively stable successor states, and in the commercialization of kingship, in which a market developed for "the perquisites of kingship and local lordship."[10] These intermediate groups provided credit, marketing, accounting, revenue collecting, and other crucial services to both the villages and the successor states and, eventually, to the European colonial state. In the process, they made themselves indispensable to the elites above them and the villagers below. They were "the oil of the Indian state system" in the period of political decentralization and redeployment that preceded and coincided with the rise of the colonial state.[11] Many members of the service gentry came to occupy a "dual role...as state servants and rentier landlords" or zamindars.[12]

André Wink, discussing the Maratha territories and building on Bayly's

[4] Bayly, *New Cambridge History of India*, II.1, p. 13.
[5] Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48* (Delhi, 1986).
[6] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*.
[7] Philip B. Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700–1740," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Aug. 1970).
[8] André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge, 1986).
[9] Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 6 and 187–89.
[10] Ibid., pp. 194–95 and 459-63.
[11] Ibid., p. 30.
[12] Ibid., p. 465.

rejection of "the Black Legend of the eighteenth century"[13] and his emphasis on the vitality of local networks of commercial, landholding, and service interests, has pushed furthest the argument for the continuity between the Mughal past and the eighteenth century. He suggested that the empire's "continued existence" had depended not on Mughal absolutism, centralism, military conquest, or the absence of "a counter-balancing territorial nobility" but instead on "the political incorporation of ever more aspiring gentry groups and nobility of indigenous or foreign extraction which rose to fortune and power."[14] In the eighteenth century, the "intermediary gentry or zamindar stratum," elevated by the Mughals and always "the prop of Muslim domination everywhere in the subcontinent," achieved new power as they asserted themselves and allied themselves with Mughal nobles competing for the remnants of the empire. Once the alliances established regional states, they consolidated their sovereignty through official appointments and revenue deductions and exemptions for the local gentry.[15] "A case can be made, then, that Muslim domination in India...in the end fell prey to its own success," with the "gentrification" of the Muslim empire. Not only was Maratha sovereignty established "within the political and socio-economic context of Mughal expansion itself," it employed the forms, nomenclature, and "structures of dominance established by the Mughals."[16]

Mughal Bengal

Bayly's and Wink's formulations apply, with slight modification, to pre-colonial Bengal. Commercialization in Bengal had probably proceeded further than in any other part of the Mughal empire and had lifted new, mostly Hindu, elites to prominence. Although agriculture was still largely subsistence, a thriving market and the requirement that rents and state revenues be paid in cash drew villagers into money relationships. The richer peasants and artisans produced rice, sugar, tobacco, indigo, cotton goods, and silk for market. Perhaps a million weavers wove textiles at mid-century for local consumption, the gigantic inland trade, and foreign export. Money-lending and banking were highly developed and linked villages to both trading and tax-collecting networks. The wealth of the Jagat Seth banking family, financiers to the *nazims* (governors) of Bengal, was so great that the family played a major role in determining who would rule. Revenue farming was common at both the zamindari and sub-zamindari levels

[13] Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*, p. 4.
[14] Ibid., pp. 26-27, 34, and 379.
[15] Ibid., pp. 8 and 31.
[16] Ibid., pp. 7–8.

although peasant holdings were not generally alienable.[17] Long before British rule began, then, "objective monetary values" were used "to express social relationships" across broad segments of the elites in Bengal.[18] It was the presence of various kinds of competing Indian entrepreneurs – commercial, military, and political – that made possible the East India Company's entry to the subcontinent's interior.

As Delhi's hold on Bengal loosened in the early decades of the eighteenth century, Mughal patterns of government remained in place. The continuities with the seventeenth century were especially strong because Bengalis, unlike the Marathas and the Sikhs to the west, did not displace the Mughals at the highest levels of provincial government. No indigenous military challenge to the Mughals developed in Bengal in the early eighteenth century. Moreover, unlike the Maratha zamindars of the Deccan,[19] Bengali zamindars had not risen out of the cultivating classes and did not possess kinship ties with and similar life styles to the peasantry.

Murshid Quli Khan, appointed as *diwan* (revenue minister) in November 1700 by Aurangzib, carried on the Mughal system while the empire broke apart. A series of non-Bengali Muslim governors succeeded Murshid Quli after his death in 1727. Nevertheless, Murshid Quli and his successors encouraged the gentrification of Bengal by relying heavily on the indigenous zamindars and diminishing the role of non-Bengali bureaucrats and military officers. Murshid Quli Khan permitted a few zamindars in western Bengal to absorb smaller zamindaris. These zamindars became the prop of British colonial government also. After the English East India Company established its rule in the 1750s and 1760s, it preserved these large zamindars and collected the land revenue through them, while progressively limiting their autonomy and privileges. Throughout the century, competition at the intermediate levels of society for the favors of the rulers was so prevalent that it precluded efforts to replace foreign governors with indigenous authorities. Western Bengal in the eighteenth century, then, was a land of small-scale artisan production and peasant cultivation[20] dominated by large landholders whose authority expanded in the early decades and shrank in the last decades.

[17] P.J. Marshall, *The New Cambridge History of India*, II. 2, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead Eastern India* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 10ff; Dharma Kumar and Meghnad Desai (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II: *c. 1757–c.1970* (Cambridge 1983), pp. 6ff and 151.

[18] Bayly, *New Cambridge History of India*, II. 2, p. 11.

[19] Wink, *Land and Sovereignty*, p. 35.

[20] Bayly has warned against exaggerating the size of the agricultural majority, pointing to the "massive local expenditure by the elites on warfare and display" and to the large numbers of "village servants, ritual specialists, artisans," soldiers, carters, itinerants, etc. He suggests that "at least four out of ten people in the total population could be viewed as non-agriculturalists." *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 51–52.

The zamindari system

The politics of land and the large landholders of western Bengal are the subject of this study. Politics are central to an understanding of eighteenth-century rural behaviors and values because political-administrative decisions, far more often than market forces, determined how control of land was distributed. Zamindaris, the largest individually held land units, were theoretically saleable but before 1790 they were rarely sold except on temporary leases. Village holdings were not ordinarily marketable. Although a powerful market for credit and commercial goods operated in rural Bengal, in the distribution of land and its rents and revenues, the market was subservient to the state before the Decennial Settlement of 1790. The zamindari was "a polity" and, unlike a contemporary British estate, not "a unit of production."[21] Zamindars and their officers almost never took an interest in how or what crops, except indigo, were grown. Their economic interests were confined to the sharing of the profits of cultivation, to the distribution of rights to their collection, and to encouragement of the cultivation of vacant land.

The zamindari system was the administrative-social formation through which the superior landholders extracted agricultural revenues for the Mughal and English East India Company states in eighteenth-century Bengal. Muslim administrators around 1400 coined the term zamindar from Persian components (*zamin* = land and *dar* = holder) and the Mughals used it to refer to the hereditary chiefs and landholders who paid tribute or the assessed revenue to the emperor. In nineteenth-century British usage, the term zamindar denoted a proprietary landlord although at times it also referred to the dominant peasants ("village zamindars") who engaged with a superior landlord for a village's rent.[22] In this study, it will be used in the restricted sense of the landholder who had a *sanad* (patent) from the state to collect the state's share of the land revenue. The zamindars under examination therefore had a dual role. Simultaneously, they were hereditary rulers or rajas of a territory in which they generally enjoyed broad autonomy and they were servants of the state, pledged to keep order and promote the welfare of their subjects, and removable if they failed to pay the revenue demanded by the state.[23]

Zamindars certainly "owned" a right to a share of the revenue as money passed through their hands on the way to the provincial treasury in the sense

[21] Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, c. 1760–1850* (New Delhi, 1979), p. 21.

[22] Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1556–1707)* (Bombay, 1963), pp. 136–37, and W.H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India: A Historical Essay with Appendices* (2nd edn., Delhi, 1968), p. 18.

[23] John Shore, Minute of 2 April 1788, Walter Kelly Firminger (ed.), *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company. Dated 28th July, 1812* (3 vols., Calcutta, 1917–18), vol. II, p. 746. Hereafter cited as *Fifth Report, 1812*.

that, with state permission, they could sell, mortgage, and inherit that share.[24] But they did not own the land itself in a meaningful sense before the end of our period.[25] Rather than owning a physical area of the earth's surface, they held rights over most of the inhabitants of the territory assigned to their management: rights to their deference, their labor, their crops, occasionally even their women. Landownership was therefore conceived of in more social and less physical terms than in contemporary western societies. Individual plots of land were in the possession of superior peasants who cultivated them or rented them to other peasants, usually without interference from the zamindar, and who usually were succeeded by their heirs on payment of a succession fee to the superior landholder. The rights of the superior peasantry fell short of absolute ownership because they could be dispossessed by the zamindar or his intermediaries and they rarely were known to sell permanently their rights of cultivation. Even a transfer between generations required in theory a superior's permission. Absolute individual ownership of land, with legally protected rights of inheritance, sale, and mortgage, was a British innovation.[26] As late as the 1780s, East India Company civil servants were still locked in debates among themselves about whether land in Bengal belonged to the state, the zamindars, or the peasants or whether ownership was shared. The debate was revived more than once in the nineteenth century. The indeterminate, corporate reciprocity in which many individuals had complementary rights to the same piece of ground and the absence of written codes defining rights of the layered interests to specific plots of land baffled British administrators who looked upon legally protected, absolute individual ownership as a natural right and a condition for economic progress.[27]

The absence of juridically defined rights of individual ownership fed the British assumption that the Indian political system was despotic.[28] In a characteristic comment, John Shore wrote: "the constitution of the Moghul empire, despotic in its principle, arbitrary and irregular in its practise, renders it sometimes almost impossible to discriminate between power and principle; fact

[24] Almost any generalization about landownership requires qualification. Many zamindars were dispossessed of their share of the revenue in the administrations of Murshid Quli Khan (1700–27) and Mir Qasim (1760-63).

[25] An exception was the *sir* or *ny-jot* lands or home farm of a zamindar which were cultivated by laborers or tenants directly under the zamindar's control.

[26] See John Shore, Minute of 2 April 1788; Ray, *Change*, chapters 2 and 4; and Walter C. Neale, "Land Is to Rule," in Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control*, pp. 3–15.

[27] Thus the term "landowner" is misleading for almost all eighteenth-century situations in Bengal. See Dharma Kumar, "A Note on the Term 'Land Control,'" in Peter Robb (ed.), *Rural India: Land, Power and Society under British Rule* (London, 1983), pp. 59ff.

[28] The ancestry of the theory of Asian despotism, widely accepted by the British in Bengal, is traced by Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), pp. 462 ff.

and right; and if custom be appealed to, precedents in violation of it are produced."[29] Four or so decades later, Holt Mackenzie, one of the most knowledgeable students of Bengali and north Indian tenures, said he had spent his life studying the varied and complex forms of land tenures "without understanding them."[30] Nevertheless, from the beginning of British rule in the 1750s, Company officers proceeded as if there were "principles" that guided relations between zamindars and their dependents that study and time would reveal. At least until the 1790s, the Company acted with caution, apprehensive about introducing change that might stir resistance from vested interests and jeopardize revenue collections, and aware that, however "despotic," the local land systems were regulated by their own logic and moral restraints. The exemption from revenue and rent demands of substantial areas for the purpose of supporting religious specialists and menial servants engaged in revenue collection and peace-keeping tasks was clear evidence that tenurial forms served vital community purposes.[31] A major concern of this study is how the patrimonial, corporate values of local kingship clashed with individualistic, legalistic British culture. However, the tension between what the raja owed to subjects below and the state above was not new to the colonial era. Rather, there was inherent in Indian kingship a conflict between the norms of paternal indulgence and ritual obligation, on the one hand, and the necessity of fiscal extraction, on the other. The zamindars of Bengal experienced the tension with particular intensity and pathos as the Mughal and colonial states heightened their demands and as commercial forms penetrated the higher ranks of society.

The imperial institutions of the Mughal and Company states met the landed rural hierarchies in the pivotal role of the zamindar. The zamindars were subordinate but vital partners to the Mughal and Company states in governing the scattered villages in which most Bengalis lived. The later Mughal emperors appointed the larger zamindars as *mansabdars* (holders of *mansab* or imperial rank) to incorporate them into the hierarchically ranked governing body of the empire. In the literature of seventeenth-century Bengal, "even the small zamindars appear as Rajas, omnipotent within their territories, while the representatives of the imperial power seem to be a distant reality hardly intruding

[29] John Shore, Minute of 2 April 1788, p. 737.

[30] Quoted in B.H. Baden-Powell, *The Land-Systems of British India* (3 vols., Oxford 1892), vol. I, p. 1.

[31] See chapter 3. Frykenberg, in emphasizing how "a veritable jungle of overlapping terminologies" has hampered "understanding of the very nature of the entities and interacting processes relating to land in India," has reminded us that "whatever the terminology, attempts to classify and differentiate between myriad varieties of zamindars, jagirdars, and ryots ... become meaningful only if the observer recognizes that all kinds of holdings and rights were intricately linked to definite socio-ceremonial and communal as well as economic and political roles." Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control*, p. xv.

into the zamindar's sphere of influence."[32] Under both Mughal and Company rule, the provincial government of Bengal solicited from Delhi confirmation of the titles of raja and maharaja by which their subjects addressed them. Accepted as a sovereign by their subjects and accustomed after centuries of Muslim rule to paying tribute or revenue to alien rulers, zamindars were the agents by which imperial governments obtained village resources.

The cultural and structural distinction between the hereditary, local raja-zamindars and the temporary imperial mansabdars was a source of conflict in Mughal principle and practice. The zamindars of Bengal were not only more or less permanent, they were Bengali-speaking and far more committed to local than to provincial or imperial Mughal interests. In their rituals, distribution of patronage, and allocation of resources, the Hindu zamindars were guided by pre-Muslim custom, the *dharma-shastras*, and mythical accounts of Hindu kingship. Before the early 1700s, the non-zamindari mansabdars, on the other hand, were almost always Muslim, Persian-speaking, temporary, and dependent for their assignments upon powerful patrons in and imperial favor from distant Delhi. Bengal was not a favorite area of service and was sometimes used as a punitive assignment for officers who had performed unsatisfactorily elsewhere.

Mansabdars often distrusted zamindars. Mughal administrative manuals and orders indicated that zamindars were considered oppressive to the peasantry and politically untrustworthy.[33] The revenue regulations issued under Akbar and Aurangzib failed even to recognize zamindars as part of "the standard revenue machinery," despite the fact that zamindars were used in many areas to gather the revenue.[34] Manucci wrote about 1700 that "usually the viceroys and governors are in a constant state of quarrel with the Hindu princes and *zamindars* – with some because they wish to seize their lands; with others, to force them to pay more revenue than is customary."[35] When Mughal officers saw behavior they disapproved of, they said it was *zamindarin*. Thus, after the raja of Burdwan's diwan and his army deserted Nazim Alivardi during the Maratha invasion of 1742, Yusuf Ali wrote that he ran away "in the manner of a *zamindar*."[36] The refractory and exploitive reputation of zamindars was reflected in the exasperation of a Mughal who, commenting in 1761 about pillaging raids of Maratha leaders in areas they conquered, said they "were not

[32] Tapan Kumar Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History* (Calcutta, 1953), pp. 22 and 31.

[33] Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 136ff.

[34] M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangazeb* (Bombay, 1968), pp. 84-85.

[35] Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India. 1653–1708*, tr. William Irvine (4 vols., London, 1906–08), vol. II, pp. 431–32.

[36] Yusuf Ali, *Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jang*, in Jadunath Sarkar (tr.), *Bengal Nawabs* (Calcutta, 1952), p. 98.

behaving as rulers, but as zamindars."[37] Their frequent failures to deliver the full revenue demand punctually and their pragmatic hesitancy in times of political disturbance led Mughal officials and their British successors to equate zamindars with deviousness and inconstancy. However, in a land of difficult communications, scattered settlements, and entrenched local hierarchies, the small bodies of alien administrators in Bengal never found a satisfactory alternative to entrusting the zamindars with revenue collection and, until the 1790s, maintenance of order.

Low population density and an abundance of arable but uncultivated land contributed to the difference in outlooks between zamindars and the provincial government. With probably fewer than 25 million people both before the 1770 famine and in 1800, after recovering from the famine,[38] Bengal had only a small fraction of the current population of west Bengal. The estimates of how much land was waste although cultivable varied from one third to two-thirds of Bengal's 90,000 square miles but all agreed the area was vast.[39] A common zamindari objective was to attract settlers into the waste lands. A principal means of opening up lands to cultivation was to exempt them partially or fully, temporarily or permanently, from the payment of rent and revenue. Zamindars did this on a liberal scale by alienating land, sometimes explicitly as land-clearing grants, sometimes as religious endowments. In periods of weak vigilance by the Mughal and British governments, zamindars and their officers exempted vast areas of cultivated land from the payment of rent, as a form of beneficence to favored subjects. Like the Mughals before them, the Company's government, whose main object was maximization of the revenue, regarded the zamindars as perfidious because their land gifts were imperiling the state's revenue base.

To a certain extent, the zamindari and the state were different types of political systems and were in conflict over "principles of social organization and of ideology."[40] The local, hereditary zamindari system was what one scholar has described as "immanent" and was "characterized by customary, informal, even intuitive but always patrimonial relations."[41] Another described it as "a form of lordship, but localistic, relativistic, or collegial, and redistribu-

[37] M. Athar Ali, "The Passing of Empire: The Mughal Case," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (July 1975), p. 392.

[38] H.T. Colebrooke in 1803 estimated the population of Bengal and Bihar to be "at least" 24 million, using local, sample surveys of population, land use, and salt consumption. Henry Thomas Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1884 reprint of 1804 edn.) pp. 9–20.

[39] *Fifth Report, 1812*, vol. I, p. 25.

[40] Burton Stein, "State Formation and Economy Reconsidered," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (July 1985), p. 408.

[41] Richard B. Barnett, *North India between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley, CA, 1980), p. 9.

tionist."[42] The foreign Mughal and British states, by contrast, were "transcendent" and were "based on relatively abstract, codified, objective rules, and on the relative uniformity and centralization which allows them to demand a monopoly on legitimate authority."[43] Or again, the Mughal (and British) state was "universalistic, absolutistic, fiscally- and extractively-oriented."[44] By the early nineteenth century, the differences had narrowed and the zamindari system had become more bureaucratic, profit-oriented, impersonal, and less expressive of fundamental Hindu culture.

Despite the distinctions of ethnicity, purpose, and permanency of tenure, the zamindar and the nazim (provincial Mughal governor) at Murshidabad had much in common. Most obviously, both performed extractive as well as redistributive functions. When either indulged a dependent with a grant of revenue-free land, he needed to find expanded resources or exact the foregone income from other people. Although the population probably grew through most of the eighteenth century until the famine of 1770, although Bengal contained unused but arable land, and although the revenue system did not operate hydraulically, one man's benefice often led to increased extraction for others. For both zamindars and nazims, extraction and redistribution were interrelated. Moreover, neither zamindars nor nazims were notably unavailable to their subjects. Murshidabad was not Delhi and its court was far less formal and grand than the emperor's. In the eighteenth century the nazims copied the zamindari practice of bringing together major revenue payers in a ceremony (*puniya*) that marked the end of one revenue year and the beginning of the next. The zamindars distributed *khilats* (robes of honor) to their subordinates, in imitation of the Mughal practice. The political authority of both zamindars and nazims was of a patrimonial sort, based on personal, face-to-face relations with broad discretion vested in the office-holder's person. The exercise of authority in turn was eased by the apolitical character of the population outside the narrow group of political elites who made decisions at the courts of the zamindars and nazims. We will look first at patrimonial authority, at the way in which familial forms of patriarchy suffused the relations between a major zamindar or nazim and his subordinate bureaucrats and revenue payers.

Zamindari power was centered in two buildings, both in the raja's chief place of residence: the revenue *kachari* (office) and the court. The revenue kachari was an office building in which rents were received roughly ten times a year, records of great complexity were kept by clerks, disputes over revenue obligations and rights were settled by the diwan (revenue minister), and subordinate

[42] Stein, "State Formation," p. 408.
[43] Barnett, *North India*, p. 9.
[44] Stein "State Formation," p. 408.

landholders or collection officers in arrears were punished by detention or bodily coercion. The zamindari diwan was ordinarily not kin to the raja and his kachari was a bureaucratic place, often associated with exaction and pain. There were also small subordinate kacharis, thatched clay or mat structures, located in outlying villages where peasants paid their revenue to intermediate landholders and where peasants in arrears were frequently detained or beaten.

By contrast, the zamindari court (*rajbari*) was where the raja presided and presented a less extractive and more beneficient, fatherly face to his subjects.[45] It was architecturally grand by Bengali standards and in the British period was often built in neo-classical European style, with columned facades. The raja's relatives, ministers, and subordinate landholders congregated here to honor their superior, ask and receive favors, and be entertained and honored in return. In court, the raja consulted his advisers, heard disputes and distributed justice with the help of *pandits*, conferred rent-free land on learned men and priests, gave honorary turbans and robes from his wardrobe to his subordinate officers and landholders, and entertained with poets, singers, musicians, and jesters. On the occasion of weddings and funerals and major *pujas* (ceremonies of worship), he gave communal feasts. In many zamindaris, even the *mandals* (village headmen) came to court and no doubt went away gratified to know their standing had been recognized and were impressed by the magnificence of the surroundings, the sophistication and refinement of the courtiers, and the power of the weapons and large stature of the often non-Bengali uniformed guards in attendance. The respect the mandals had for their raja depended more than anything else on his revenue-collecting arrangements, which were balanced between privileged rates for local elites such as the mandals and the danger of over-assessment and perceptions of excessive inequality among others. The mandals and other elites also must have judged their raja by the ability of his militia and judicial decision-making to afford them protection and on the ritual services he arranged to have performed.

As leader of his territory's *samaj* (society), the raja provided maintenance for Brahmins in the form of revenue-free land grants. In a large zamindari, invariably administered in decentralized fashion, this was the key to the raja's socio-ritual hegemony. He issued sanads (written authority) to Brahmins permitting them to perform marriages. And when a man had been excommunicated from his *jati* (caste) for violating its rules of behavior, a zamindari sanad was sometimes required for readmission.[46] The raja built and endowed some of the

[45] There were female zamindars in the eighteenth century but they were rare enough that masculine terminology will usually be employed in general discussions for the sake of stylistic simplicity.

[46] This was true of the Burdwan zamindar in 1774 even though the management of the land revenues had been transferred from the raja to temporary revenue farmers. PCOR Prog. of Burdwan of 30 May 1774, vol. 1.

temples in his territory and provided for the performance of certain pujas which Hindus believed affected their welfare. He built roads and dug ornamental tanks in the vicinity of his major residences; he usually was responsible for the repair of flood-control embankments; and he encouraged the clearing of waste and jungle land with low-rent or rent-free tenancies. In general, though, zamindars' redistributive spending away from their residences rarely included public works other than temple construction, river bank repairs, and, occasionally, a road. Their hold on their subjects' loyalty rested more on their patronage, their distribution of revenue obligations, and the way their ritual and ceremonial functions matched the expectations their subjects had of Hindu kingship.[47] Judging from Mukundaram's *Candi-mangala* (1589), Edward Dimock and Ronald Inden have written:

> the ideal unit in Bengali society...is not the Bengal region as a whole; nor is it Bengal as represented in a simple rural village or its regional capital. The ideal unit of Bengali society is considered to be the local chiefdom with its capital; and the highest social ideal that a man can attain is to become the raja and master of his own local chiefdom and to live at the pinnacle of the complex urban life which goes on in the chiefdom's capital town.[48]

The nature of political authority

The nazim's court at Murshidabad shared some of the patrimonial character found in the zamindar's rajbari. The Mughal buildings in Bengal were unimposing[49] compared to those in Delhi or even in other provincial capitals such as Hyderabad, Lahore, and Lucknow, as if to conform to the preference for scaled-down pomp among high-status Bengalis,[50] who, for example, traveled with a smaller retinue than their up-country counterparts.[51] The nazims distributed robes of honor from their personal wardrobes to mansabdars and zamindars, graded in costliness to distinguish the ranks of the recipients. They furnished them with horses from their stables. They fed Muslim mansabdars, *shaikhs* (chiefs, elders), and *ulama* at their own table, varying the number and quality of the dishes with the guest's rank. Nazims also made themselves

[47] The fullest cultural analysis of Bengali zamindaris between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries is Ronald B. Inden, "The Hindu Chiefdom in Middle Bengali Literature," in Edward C. Dimock, (ed.), *Bengal Literature and History* (East Lansing, 1967), pp. 21–46.

[48] Edward C. Dimock and Ronald B. Inden, "The City in Pre-British Bengal, According to the *mangala-kavyas*," in Richard L. Park (ed.), *Urban Bengal* (East Lansing, MI, 1969), p. 14.

[49] Philip B. Calkins, "The Role of Murshidabad as a Regional and Subregional Center in Bengal," in Park (ed.), *Urban Bengal*, pp. 25–26.

[50] Calkins, ibid., suggested the reason was that Mughal officials assigned to Bengal did not expect to remain there long.

[51] Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809–10* (Patna, 1928), pp. 155–56.